

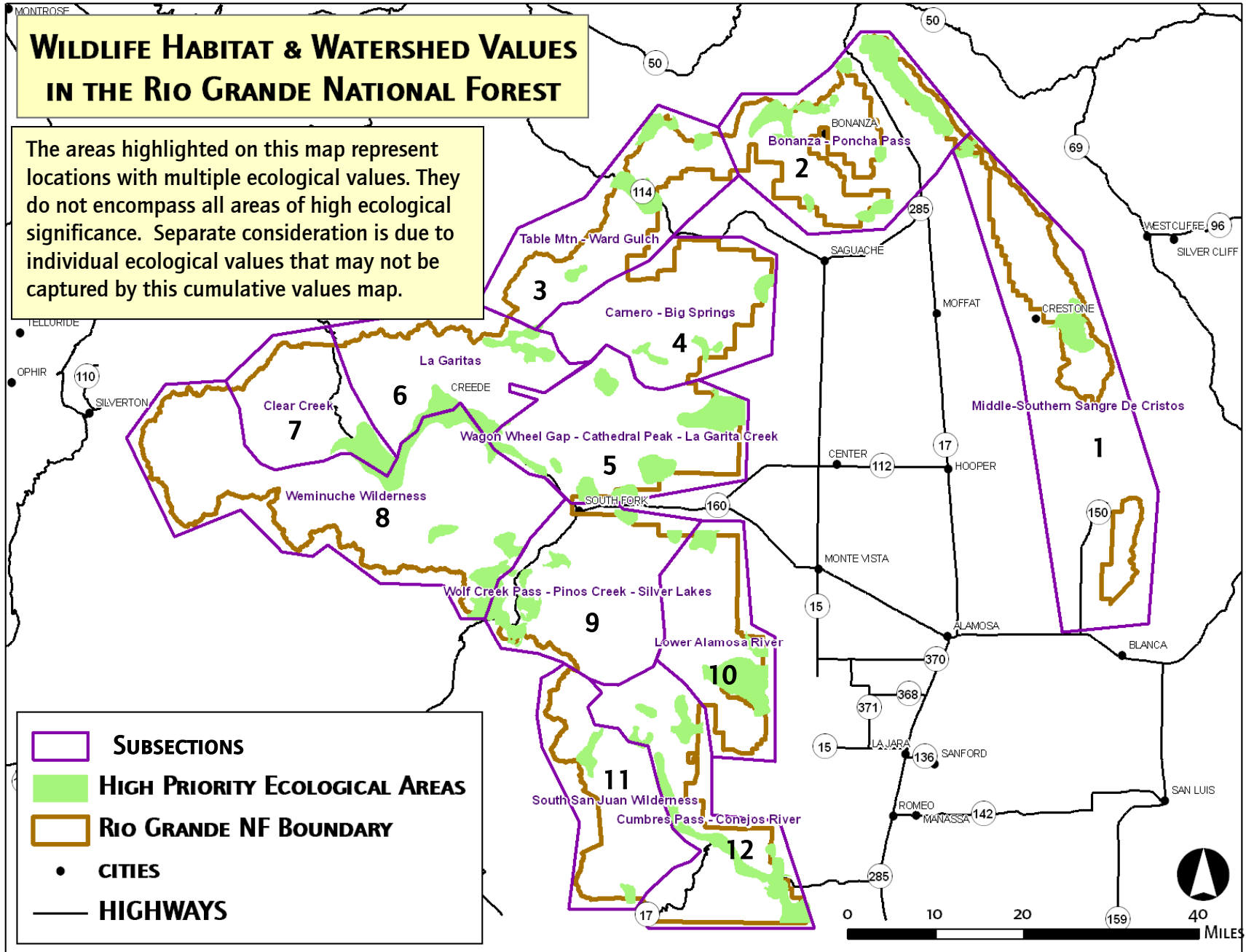
## **Executive Summary**

The Rio Grande National Forest is situated in the south-central portion of Colorado and serves as an important recreation destination for hiking, camping, backpacking, skiing, wildlife viewing, hunting, mountain biking, and motorized recreation. There are 2,414 miles of inventoried roads and additional miles of trails across the three Forest districts. We conducted a two-phased process to identify wildlife habitat and watershed priority areas in the Rio Grande National Forest to facilitate full consideration of ecological needs in travel management planning. First we compiled existing GIS data layers for 11 focal species, identified watersheds of concern, and watersheds listed as imperiled under the Clean Water Act. Using a simple analysis process, we combined these data layers to produce a Wildlife Habitat and Watershed Values map, which served as the basis for highlighting ecological priority areas within the Forest. This assessment was then augmented with expert input from agency (Forest Service, Division of Wildlife, National Park Service) biologists and hydrologists, and other local experts to refine the ecological prioritization. All data were compiled in an Access database, providing a transparent framework for ecologically-based decision-making. A review of the literature on the impacts of recreation and travel on ecological resources was conducted to establish guidelines for travel management relative to the ecological values identified for the Forest. These guidelines were then applied to each area of the Forest to formulate site-specific and route-specific recommendations, offering a balanced management approach that provides appropriate access and recreation opportunities while minimizing ecosystem impacts.

We divided the Forest into twelve subsections based on geography, management, and delineations such as major roads and natural barriers. General guidelines for ecologically-based travel management are provided for the entire Forest, with specific recommendations developed for each of these twelve subsections, offering protections for both areas with multiple ecological values, as well as those with unique individual values.

### ***Forest-wide Recommendations***

- Protect the roadless qualities of the Forest, including identified Roadless Areas and citizen-inventoried roadless habitat.
- Close and restore all user-created routes and implement measures to prevent future illegal route creation (e.g., education and signage, berms and other natural barriers, and enforcement).
- Prioritize maintaining routes to standards in identified watersheds of concern to minimize sedimentation impacts.
- Eliminate cross-country winter motorize travel in winter range areas and limit motorized use to designated routes from December 1 through May 15 to prevent disturbance to wintering animals.
- Implement seasonal route closures in calving and lambing areas from May 15 through June 15.
- Implement seasonal use restrictions in migratory corridors from October-November and May-June.
- Close the Rio Grande River corridor to cross-country motorized travel for game retrieval due to the sensitive nature of the riparian corridor and the numerous ecological values it supports.



### ***Subsection 1: Middle-Southern Sangre de Cristos***

This subsection runs the length of the Sangre de Cristo range from Hayden Pass to the southern forest boundary. Much of the Forest lands in this subsection are within the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness. High priority ecological areas predominate west of the town of Crestone, in particular the Willow Creek and South Crestone drainages.

- Set daily use limits on heavily-used hiking trails and dispersed camping east of Crestone.
- Preserve the remote character of the Sand Creek drainage – maintain current access level and establish new parking area north of Camino Chamisa.

### ***Subsection 2: Bonanza – Poncha Pass***

This subsection encompasses the northern Sangre de Cristo Mountains, Poncha Pass, and west to Ward Gulch. Antora Peak, Antora Meadows, East Middle Creek, the Ford Creek drainage and its tributaries, Sawlog Gulch, the Limekiln-Saguache Peak area, and Poncha Pass and the lower elevation slopes of the Sangre de Cristo range are high priority ecological areas in this subsection.

- Maintain motorized loops on the west side of Highway 285 at Poncha Pass. Implement seasonal closures, visitor education, and communication with adjacent private land owners to prevent disturbances near sage grouse leks and brood rearing areas. Use a combination of designated dispersed camp sites, natural barriers and education/enforcement to discourage cross-country travel and uncontrolled dispersed camping.
- Close the Antora Meadows (764) and the Continental Divide (813) trails to motorized use.

### ***Subsection 3: Table Mountain – Ward Gulch***

This subsection includes the east side of the Continental Divide from the La Garita Wilderness Area to Ward Gulch. Identified high priority ecological areas include North Pass-Cochetopa Hill, Luder Creek, Middle Blady, Sargent’s Mesa and Hawkin’s Gulch.

- Close and restore redundant routes in the North Fork-Saguache Park area.

### ***Subsection 4: Carnero – Big Springs***

The Carnero-Big Springs Subsection extends from the west side of the La Garita Wilderness to the eastern Forest boundary, and is largely defined by Route 787 to the south. High priority ecological areas are located around North Tracy Canyon, Mesa Mountain and the Carnero Creek watershed.

- Close and restore redundant routes, including Antelope (709) and Big Dry Gulch (720) that traverse ecologically important habitats.

### ***Subsection 5: Wagon Wheel Gap – Cathedral Peak – La Garita***

This subsection encompasses the eastern portion of the Divide Ranger District from the La Garita Wilderness, north of the Rio Grande River to the Forest boundary. High priority ecological areas in this subsection are highlighted along the Rio Grande River corridor at Wagon Wheel Gap, Alder, the Eagle Rock-Eagle Mountain area, and Benino-Groundhog Park.

- Buffer cliffs at Eagle Rock, Wagon Wheel Gap, and the Natural Arch Picnic Area from recreational activities during peregrine nesting from February 1 – July 31.
- Create a quiet recreation area in the southeastern portion of the subsection around East Butte and protect the ecological resources in this area.
- Close and restore the Benino Trail (786), which has been heavily damaged.

#### ***Subsection 6: La Garita***

The La Garita subsection is characterized by the La Garita Wilderness Area and two major backcountry/roadless areas – Wason Park and Bristol Head. High priority ecological areas include the Saguache Creek headwaters, the Rio Grande River corridor, Halfmoon Pass-Wason Park, and the lower Rat Creek-Willow Creek drainages.

#### ***Subsection 7: Clear Creek***

The Clear Creek subsection extends from the Continental Divide to Highway 149 and the Spring Creek drainage to the east, south to Rio Grande River valley and west to Lost Trail Creek. High priority ecological areas have been identified around the Rio Grande River and the Seepage Creek and lower Clear Creek drainages.

#### ***Subsection 8: Weminuche Wilderness***

This subsection is characterized by the Weminuche Wilderness Area and adjacent backcountry areas. High value ecological areas are located around Spruce Lakes to Decker Meadows in the southeastern portion of the subsection and along the lower Goose Creek and Trout Creek drainages.

- Limit cross-country motorized travel by ATV for game retrieval and dispersed camping in identified lynx linkage habitat.
- Close the Beartown Trail (506) from Beartown to Kite Lake to create a quiet recreation area for non-motorized users and to minimize impacts to sensitive wetland habitats around Kite Lake.
- Close Fern Creek Trail (815) to motorized use to prevent further trail damage and unauthorized cross-country travel.
- Close the Trout Creek Trail (831) to motorized use to protect lynx linkage habitat in this identified roadless area.

#### ***Subsection 9: Wolf Creek Pass – Pinos Creek – Silver Lakes***

This subsection is a mixed-use area managed for forest, range, recreation and wildlife. High priority ecological areas are highlighted around Wolf Creek Pass-Gibbs Creek, Pass Creek-Fox Mountain, Tewksberry and the lower South Fork of the Rio Grande, and Grayback Mountain.

- Analyze route network around the Beaver Creek and Highway Springs Campgrounds to reduce route density in these important habitat areas.
- Close Tewksberry (842) and Munger Canyon (874) trails to motorized use.

#### ***Subsection 10: Lower Alamosa River***

The Lower Alamosa River subsection encompasses the southeastern portions of the Conejos and Divide Districts, from San Francisco Creek, south of Del Norte, to the La Jara Reservoir State Wildlife Area. Cedar Springs, San Francisco Creek, Terrace

Reservoir, Cat Creek, and Greenie Mountain have been identified as high priority ecological areas in this subsection.

- Close redundant routes in the Cat Creek area to reduce overall road density.
- Redesign South Rock Trail (702) for ATV use to reduce erosion.
- Close Big Lake (706) and West Frisco (850) Trails to motorized use.
- Revert Frisco Fittton Trail (894) to motorcycle use only to minimize habitat impacts and reduce erosion.

***Subsection 11: South San Juan Wilderness***

This subsection is characterized by the South San Juan Wilderness Area and adjacent backcountry management areas. High priority ecological areas are located around the Conejos River, Hansen Creek, and upper Rio do Los Pinos.

- Implement enforcement strategies targeting winter motorized encroachment into Wilderness around Red Lake.

***Subsection 12: Cumbres Pass – Conejos River***

This subsection is a mixed-management area largely defined by the Conejos River Basin, extending from Platoro Reservoir in the north to the New Mexico border. High priority ecological areas are identified along the Conejos River including Bighorn Creek and Fox Creek, the upper Conejos River around Platoro and between Lake Fork and Saddle Creek, and Spencer Lake-Willow Mountain-Jim Creek.

- Analyze route network between Osier Mountain to Bighorn Creek to reduce overall road density and minimize impacts to sensitive wildlife habitats.
- Close spur roads such as Devil (100.2A) and Queen (105.3A) in high priority ecological area.